

Class- P.G Sem II (English)

Paper – cc 7

Alexander Pope's Essay on Criticism

About the poet : Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Alexander pope is an English essayist, critic and satirist. He can be regarded as one of the greatest poets of Enlightenment. He was born in Roman catholic family on May, 21, 1688 at Twickenham, near London. His father was a wholesale linen merchant. Pope was educated privately by priests and also read widely for himself. This application to study is said to have brought on the illness which, at the age of twelve, ruined Pope's health and left him deformed and stunted in body. He began to compose verses at a very early age ; his pastorals, written when he was sixteen (though published later). Actually first major contribution of Pope to the literary world is 'An Essay on Criticism', which was published in 1711. Its brilliant polished epigrams (eg . "A little learning is a dangerous thing" , "To err is human, to forgive, divine" , "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread", which have become a part of proverbial language. The well deserved success of 'An Essay on Criticism' brought pope a wider circle of friends, notably Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, who were then collaborating on 'The Spectator'.

The evolution of Pope's poetic career is generally put in four periods. In the first period he wrote his pastorals, Windsor Forest, Messiah, Essay on Criticism, Eloisa to Abelard, and The Rape of the Lock. In the second period falls the Translation of Homer. In the third which is the best period of Pope's life and which have been called the Twickenham or Horatian period we have the spectacle of the Dunciad as well as the Epistles, and in the fourth period the poet gave us the philosophical Essay on Man and Epistles to Dr. Arbuthnot. In his works, pope deals with directly the major religious, political and intellectual problems of his time. He used heroic couplet.

Pope's Essay on Criticism

In 1711, Pope published the Essay on Criticism. Here Pope followed the tradition of Boileau. In the essay on criticism, Pope is addressing not so much the ingenuous reader as the intending writer. In the words of Jonathan Richardson, " The Essay on Criticism is an irregular collection of thoughts, thrown together as they offered themselves as Horace's 'Art of Poetry' was." The thoughts of Essay on Criticism are not original; they have been borrowed from the ancients and the French. But the conciseness and epigrammatic manner of repudiating the old truths certainly

belonged to Pope. He very ably put the ideas borrowed from others in wonderfully terse, epigrammatic, and quotable verse.

The essay is divided into three parts. In the first part (lines 1-200) we find his observations on the art of criticism in general, in the second (lines 201-559) a treatment of the chief causes of faulty judgement and in the third (lines 560-740) , a sketch of the ideal critic and also a brief account of the history of criticism.

Part I : indictment of false critics

Part II : Obstacles to good criticism

Part III : wisdom of the critics

Pope opens the Essay by lamenting the corrupt taste of his day, and says that true taste is rare among critics. Pope argues that it takes as much skill to be a critic as it does to be a writer but that people often venture beyond their natural talents ; further, while many people do have the capacity for good taste, some have been ‘spoiled by false education’. For both writers and critics , Pope argues , aesthetic judgement should stem first and foremost from ‘nature’. For this, he suggests to study of the classical writers. These rules are based on natural laws : balance, symmetry, and beauty without ornamentation. He suggests that writers should adhere to rules, but critics should recognize the need for new approaches for evolving truths. In the second part, Pope points out common mistakes done by critics. He warns the critic against judging by parts rather than by whole. He should take the effect of a work of art as a whole :

“ Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find

Where nature moves, and rapture warms the mind ;

.....

In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts

Is not th’ exactness of peculiar parts

Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call

But the joint force and full result of all.”

He is also against those critics whose judgement is based on metaphor, imagery, style or other less relevant qualities. He also suggests critic not to focus much on minor faults rather see the over all merit of any work. He condemns judgement based on popular notions and without a proper understanding of the work. He warns against prejudices based on an author’s background. It refers his own experiences as a Catholic and his challenges due to limited formal education

and disabilities. He warns critics of the dangers of superficial knowledge : ‘A little learning is dangerous thing ; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.’ It suggests that critics lacking deep understanding miss the true beauty and meaning of the poetry.

This brings us to Pope’s definition of a true critic. A true critic, according to him, is a person who is endowed with knowledge and discrimination, passes disinterested judgements with modesty, courtesy and good breeding and praises the merits even of his enemy . He gives an image of ideal critic who supports the literary process, encourage writers through constructive feedback and preserve the integrity of literary criticism.

Some critic views that Pope shows little originality as a critic. He only collects the rules of the ancient writers and expresses them in his own characteristic manner. But still his criticism has a value of its own and help in formulating the taste of his times. Atkins also thinks that the criticism of Pope, though not very original, is important. He says

“ It may be argued that the work (The Essay on Criticism) lacks originality that it is little more than a collection of trite common places, the virtue of which has long since vanished. Yet the value of its teaching on the art of criticism cannot easily be underrated; for among its many precepts are not a few of lasting validity.”

.....XXXXXXXX.....

Source ;- scribd

Shailesh Ranjan